

Bryn Fortey

AN ELEGY IN SEARCH OF SYNCOPATION

I come to stamp on Disco's grave
not sway four-on-the-floor beats
or patch together the Frankenstein
parts of musical monsters

I did not know you Disco
not even during your seventies
peak of club and chart success
when your rhythm ruled the globe

You gave dance to the world
and extravagant styles
drugs and sexual freedom
reacting against older times

You're dead now Disco
each craze flares then fades
you had a bright moment
but I mourn you not

VULTURE

A death vulture sits
On the roof opposite
To where I live

It spears me with
A baleful eye
When I open curtains

It longs to feed
To tear my flesh
Pick bare my bones

If it had lips
It would lick them
With hungry anticipation

The death vulture has
A list of victims

I guess I must be on it

Holly Day

The Spaces Between

I show my house the pictures of you
ask it if it remembers when you lived closer
when you were a frequent guest. I feel the ache and the strain
of a house trying to uproot itself, as if
it were some great, lazy dog trying to find the will to move
twitching its tail in a futile attempt
to attract attention to itself.

I, too, wish I could find some way to reach you
that doesn't require the enormous effort it takes to get to the airport
or make plans that involve weeks and weeks of my life in advance.
These are fragile excuses, ones
I don't dare speak aloud. Instead, I tell the house

you'll be back someday
to sit on my couch and fill these empty rooms
with your stories and your laughter
and it will be so wonderful that it will be as if
you'd never left.

These Things

My husband says he hates this house
And its rough edges
And the bad memories
I don't know what he's talking about.

At dinner, I give pointed lectures to our daughter
About how you get from life what you put into it
How if you think the world is shit, your world will be shit. My husband
doesn't seem to know I'm talking to him And tells our daughter
maybe she should smile every once in a while Not be such a
sourpuss.

My husband says he hates this life
Doesn't know what he did to deserve
A wife like me
A family like ours
A house like this

I tell him he must have really fucked up in his last life
This is the shit-end of karma.

Tatow

The years of marriage can be counted like lines
dark as any made by a thread-wrapped needle dipped in ink
inflicted with the same grunting force as a thin-lipped woman
with a thorn-tipped stick, is it love that holds you down
or just the restraining weight you can't shake free?

There are consequences for complaining, for those small, quiet sounds you
think no one can hear in the middle of the night. Those have all been tallied and
when you finally die, your complaints will be
imprinted on your skin in indelible ink for all to see, buried deep inside the son
and daughter who watched your dreams fold in like a wrinkled butterfly a
specimen drawer of dreams pushed down by the end of a pin.

Trying to Be

As the years pass, I have grown more aware
of all of the things I seem unable to write about
love, for one thing. I don't know how
to write anything convincing about love.

As my children grow up and my husband gets older
I grow more and more resigned to the things I can't feel
love, especially, I don't think I know what it is.
If I sit and analyze my heart
I'm uncomfortably aware of this pantomime of caring
my fake day-to-day. This is something

I can write about:
my shortcomings as a human.
The things I haven't done.
All of my lies.

Sunrise

The blackbird flutters across the lake, perches curiously
on a church spire revealed by the drought.
As the water level drops, more of the town is revealed:

a city hall, a courthouse
a one-room schoolhouse, a dime store--
some with boards still nailed over their windows
as though preparing for a hurricane, or to keep looters out.

More birds settle on the buildings

as the days pass and more roosts emerge
stake claim to the town as though their word matters
fill the evening and morning with proprietary chatter.

Rebecca Frost

There aren't enough words to create a barrier and
when I was in college
I had a professor who taught me that
I have a lot to hide.

I'd written this character in a short story
and she was a hero of some kind
saved the president or something
I don't remember I don't like writing poetry because
it's too revealing.
and that part doesn't really matter.
The thing is
she was giving a talk
to some high school students and
at the end
after saying all the stuff she was supposed to
she pushed back her sleeves to show her scars
and told the kids that that this strength
comes with a cost

My professor filled up the margins
with his dark ink
and scrawled admonition
that self-harm
isn't a plot point
and I shouldn't be telling him
things I didn't understand.

He didn't ask
a college student
why she was thinking
about cutting.

Why this
publicly strong
character revealing her apparent weakness
would be on my mind.

He just filled up the margins with his own words
and that was it.

So on the one hand
it was a success

because he didn't see it anyway.
But I still don't like poetry
because I need to craft a place to hide.

Bruce Hodder

My Greatest Luck

House-sitting for some friends of yours awake
early, coffee by the open door garden that we
don't have, the odd dog bark rain falling
through the big tree across the lane. A train
bumps past, blows a long, high horn sound
sharp and present on the autumn air. Two
rooms downstairs, one giant kitchen four
bedrooms, the king size bed we slept in. Going
home soon to our one-bed flat thinking vaguely
of the bad decisions, the mistakes, all of the
untaken chances that led me to my greatest
luck, with you.

Submission Request

(for Bill Wyatt, haiku master, RIP)

I look up at the clouds.
I look down at the daisies.
Then I ask the wind:
get Bill to send a poem.

'Wrote a Poem Last Night'

Wrote a poem last night.
Line after line
was genius.

Then the dawn rain
woke me up,
and I forgot it.

A Good Deal

My great uncle Harry died in World War II
in Burma. He was only twenty-one.
His brother Sonny went, but he made it home, or
at least the bones of him made it home. He was so
traumatised by the horrors that he saw, by the

sadism of his Japanese guards,
it broke him. The Sonny who disembarked
after VJ Day on the shores of England
in the care of the Red Cross wasn't him,
not the Sonny who had left just a year ago
full of fake breeziness. His grieving parents
barely recognised the stammering shell
who stared at his slippered feet for hours, and
howled as he stalked the halls of their home
when night fell.

I have lived a long, good life
in peace. I hate the atomic bomb. But in their place,
I might well have cheered the Yanks, hearing that
they had flattened Hiroshima
and buried Nagasaki only three days later. I
can see how thousands being pulverised in
exchange for my two babies' stolen lives
might have satisfied me, in the heat of war.

Honour Roll

I honour with my poems those who got me writing: the
heroes of the renaissance, those small press giants of
the Sixties and the Seventies, still working when, in the
blighted years of Thatcher, I picked up my pen. They're
semi-lost now under the pile of garbage that buries
most history of worth and meaning. Chris Torrance; Bill
Wyatt, modest haiku master; Brenda Williams and
Barry Tebb, both were kind; Dave Cunliffe – 'old
decrepit' – whose small press mags were a pleasure
just to look at, let alone to read. Some were
acknowledged in their life, most weren't, except by a
diminishing group of peers.

I honour every name, and many more besides. Their
words still dazzle on the fading pages of torn
magazines in dusty bookshop boxes, or letters from a
dead hand I proudly kept, stored in the cupboard with
my towels and bedsheets waiting for the next
renaissance to find them.

Valli Poole

The Spread

Winter mornings she was up before dawn

walking the silence before the neighbourhood awakened.
She came home with leaf litter on her coat, seeds in the
pockets, smelling of damp and nature.

Sometimes she wrote about who she met
a raven blinded in one eye, a
wind that whispered of secrets, a
songbird in death who sang louder than
any other bird. But mostly she sat

distracted by poetry, a curl of cigarette smoke
and how the spread of tarot cards had
played out on the kitchen table. Today,
when everyone else was invisible, she was not!
She wrapped herself up for warmth,

raked her cheeks feet hands through her still
thick, auburn hair and sighed. The cards
had revealed themselves and she must now
own her past – live her present
and prepare for what might lay ahead.
Your kitchen –

Beneath nicotine-stained walls
tea grouts clog an enamel sink

broken lino reveals
a collage of newspaper beneath the
fat of copha spit glue

A week of dishes sit
soaking in a red plastic bowl

precious drink glasses lightly rinsed
stand upside down draining

Beer bottles in proud salute
nestle near the pedal bin

hidden in the cupboard - brandy bottles
grow like fungi in the darkness

every surface full to bursting with
a hoarder's second-hand stuff

and you standing in the doorway
glass in hand – smiling sly - defiant

ready to rage against
your daughter's rebuke.

Ron Androla

Faces in Plates of Scrambled Eggs

“The bitch just wants my money!” Joe stresses. He crushes a low cigarette into a buttery hunk of toast. Neither of us have finished our plates.

“Duh,” I retort. Carol has always treated Joe like shit. But he *loves* her. They've broken up & gotten back together way too many times. Joe *loves* her. I don't get it. Carol's face reminds me of a goofy, whinnying cartoon horse. She's been married 3 times & has had children by each of the ex-husbands. The ex-husbands have all mysteriously vanished from the planet. She's angry she receives no monetary or emotional support. I've seen her slap her oldest son across the back of his head for nothing. I've heard her screaming about messy rooms, undone dishes, nobody ran the vacuum. Joe lives there now, & I've visited. Joe acts like an apologetic slave. I've heard Carol grunt & make noises like tickled swine. She makes me ill, especially since Joe reveals, in great detail, highlights of their sexual adventures. He insists Carol gives the best blowjobs of any blowjob he's ever had in his life. I don't want to imagine the image. I eat my vodka for erasure. Joe slams

his 6th shot & grins.

“I can't help but love her,” Joe continues. I've heard it all before, many times.

“YOU ASSHOLE.” I try to brush the topic away. We've worked 3rd shift & also sat at Hunter's Inn. Now we're sitting at my kitchen table. I've made breakfast, & I've made a mess. We're drunk. We had Doc's special Coffee Royale they make in Italy to start their days, or so he told us from the old morning bar at Hunter's. Steamy black coffee & a shot of whiskey, topped by a splash of Ouzo. We gulped several cups. Then we guzzled cold drafts for a while before weaving to my house. “GET A FUCKING GRIP!”

I open my eyes before dusk. Across the table Joe snores & snorts in his eggs. In 2 hours we'll be back at work.

From Ron's book Factory Fables 2017
Joe as Buddha

“I heard from Kurt today,” I tell Joe.

“& what does that stoned commie drunk have to say for himself?”

We're smoking a joint on the cricket-enhanced loading dock at the far end of the factory, on a moonlit break from the machines.

“He maintains pissing is a cheap orgasm.”

Joe breaks up. He laugh-coughs. “That whore!” he bellows. Joe's read all of Kurt's books. He's an absolute, unequivocal fan. “Kurt is a true fuckin' comrade in arms! I want his women!” Joe wails. “That commie slut! Make sure you tell him I sd that shitting is a spiritual ejaculation!”

Joe cracks up. He impersonates Curly warding off something weird with his long arm. He pushes & thumbs the soft bone into my pinching fingers. An enormous black train rushes behind the factory-coated trees & violin-insane crickets in the thick weeds out back.

“I'll bet Kurt's probably drunk & passed out right now, with 2 naked chicks beside him in Detroit,” I say. I suck the dope for a giant hit, exhale wet smoldering dragons. The smoke shades a corner spotlight on the dock, where mosquitoes fry to the glass, like moving

gray clouds across the slow moon.

“He's no doubt pissing his bed & smiling! The commie fuck!” Joe quakes. Joe has Buddha's beer belly. When he's sufficiently fucked-up, Joe has the same expression as peaceful Buddha on his face, too. With eyes slit, lips slit, the stars pull his skin & soul. Ascension & sarcasm rise with the orchestrated music of Frank Zappa, loud in Buddha's head, playing tricky xylophone rolls around his skull. Joe worships Zappa, & Kurt. Tonight, after coughing & yelling & laughing, as we walk back thru invisible monster birdsongs of crickets & into the factory's heavy-duty overhead lights, I think Joe looks like John goddamn Belushi.

From Ron's book Factory Fables 2017

Andrew Riutta

U.P., 1970 Something

When pushing down dead trees was good enough fun.

When old ladies solved most of the problems.

When phones were just for talking, and the pink dusks held us captive with dreams of raw and desperate love.

When nobody ever really got hurt.

When a blue jumbo marble contained the universe.

When dirt roads mattered.

When country music was mostly made in the country.

When a boy could play for hours among the tumbleweeds.

When the world could be fixed with a pair of pliers.

When Frosted Flakes was the food of the gods.

When the neighbors flew kites in the dark wind and laughed.

When blood was real.

When the color yellow led to affections more often than red.

When birds sang every important truth there ever was.

When a big old bear could still roam the cold Michigan shores hunting for his own death.

driftwood . . .

such a long way

to stillness

Recipes from the Old Country

At church, the marquee said: "Exercise Daily: Walk with Jesus." I thought of my grandmother, who, at least twice a week, would climb down her cellar steps to haul up potatoes and onions for pasties. After they'd removed both of her breasts, she said she felt lighter, closer to God. Most days, she never took off her apron---never sat long enough to leave an impression in the cushion of her rocking chair. Yet, around the same time the day's breeze could be seen leaving the apple tree that stood between her and the glow of dusk, she'd rest her hands---one in the other---upon the smooth surface of her formica table, and then ease her sigh into a mostly-silent prayer.

laundry day---

inside the whirlwind

yellow butterflies

Good Enough

My dear friend and former college professor is dying at home in his bed while the trees are turning red, yellow and orange. First it was academia and a much-younger wife. Then yardwork and sailing. Now shivers inside a cheap sleeping bag that will likely be used to line his coffin. I think I could get used to the darkness more than not being able to breathe. Or suppose after death God gives us each a heavenly snorkel, or cuts slits in our individual spirits so we can inhale the divine. Hallelujah. All I know is that we used to get drunk together and watch the skirts of female tennis players get shoved around by the wind because I'm pretty sure the wind is male. Or sometimes we'd talk politics---but very rarely. I buried my old dog in his back yard, and he painted her a nice stone, name and all. That is our story, and I'm pretty sure it is good enough.

harvest-moon ---

the broom's bristles

stiff and short

Gone Wild

The young hippie gal on YouTube said there's no such thing as "us and them. Me or you." No heaven or hell either---Here and now is as profound as it gets. Jesus dead on the cross was just a bad dream, even though what's bad isn't bad at all. Or good. Pa didn't really milk the cows in the cold when he was young. No one did because nobody was actually around to say they had. And you weren't ever even born. Nothing was. But still somehow it's all living, breathing magic, with or without our understanding. Even a curled-up leaf. Even our smelly shit. And that's beautiful because then everything's our savior, which means nothing else has to be---On and on she went. I kept listening, but felt like I'd been on a tilta whirl after gulping down two elephant ears and a Dr. Pepper in the hot sun. But who the heck knows: she could be mostly right about more than half of it at least. Plus she's pretty.

choke cherry blossoms---
the scent
of blood sausage

Stew

Every meal ought to be a poor man's last supper. That notion was how my grandmothers taught humility and gratitude. Grace. Because another may not come. And people we love deeply die. Might not ever see them again. So you better warm their stomachs while you can---their hearts. And yours, of course. That's my plan for today. And also to stay sober, even though I do call for a bottle of beer in my recipe. Plus parsnips (they say they can grow just about anywhere). And meat, meat, meat. It seems it's what makes us feel most alive. At least for me. I crave it about as much as I do a woman---all dressed up, sparkly and perfumed in this very ugly world.

September drizzle---
after the porchlight's glare
a deeper darkness

A Heart and its Rib Cage

Could it be
that it's the nature of the cosmos
to try to protect itself
by exaggerating its chaos?
If in yelling
my own zealous depths
I frightened
the delicate little birds,
dear Lord, I apologize.

she is gone
I'm still here---
pine branches falling

Chicago

I once wrote a poem about it being such a dark place that even the marrow oozing out from its hacked bones tries to turn around and creep back inside. But my little girl drove there all by herself yesterday in a rusty fifteen-hundred-dollar car because she wants to explore her options in this world. In this sheer existence. Maybe even catch a bus to other burning stars. I sure hope she goes to see Van Gogh in the museum while she's there. And, as much as I want her to peruse the bright colors of his fantastical love, I hope his crows and peasants remind her of home, and that she suddenly realizes the grand cultural parade she's been craving had been right front of her all along, and we can talk about this epiphany while we swing and smoke together in the smoldering pink sunlight.

Google searching
another word for hope . . .
winter rain